

Tom, Thanks for The Polar Express

December 18, 2019

THE POLAR EXPRESS (2004)

Directed by Robert Zemeckis

Written by Robert Zemeckis & Chris Van Allsburg

Starring Tom Hanks as Conductor, Father, Hobo, Scrooge, Santa, & Hero Boy

Durable plastic storage tubs are not that expensive, I can't imagine why we keep all this stuff in cardboard boxes. But that's how we did it growing up. Every new December, they'd get dragged out, and they'd wear against the coarse basement floor, shedding a ghost of filth in their trail. The same fuzzy strip of packing tape that struggles all year to seal the top is pulled back and the affects of childhood are exposed to cleansing daylight. Kitschy electric candles for the windows; tarnished sleigh bells that sound like grimy pennies rattling in soup cans; VHS tapes conserving not only A Muppet Family Christmas, and Yogi's First Christmas, but also the ancient commercials that aired within; twelve wooden nutcrackers, accrued over twelve years collecting with my Grampy John; tattered books, illustrated Clement Moores, the holiday issue of the Scholastic *I Spy* collection, and Chris Van Allsburg's *The Polar Express*; annually narrated by my father, understood by those less naive than I.

It's uncanny how many holiday specials feature a theme of cynicism. Always the same old tale of reluctance and inevitable admission to Christmas spirit. *Miracle on 34th Street*, *The Santa Clause*, and *Charlie Brown* (to name a few) are all stories about disbelief. It's cynical just to highlight the cynical nature of people doing their best to weather a season so emotionally and financially taxing. But, as a kid, these themes were lost on me because I wasn't cynical enough to understand them. All this to say, the Classic Christmas Narrative™ is made by and *for adults*, and it still manages misunderstand adults completely. Yes, the Santa part is for kids, but Santa's not the singular nucleus of Christmas spirit. It's supposed to be about letting your heart be light, and being together as in olden days. It's about those dusty cardboard boxes and the good preserved within. It's about the reminder.

But, oh, did I feel cynical rewatching *The Polar Express*. Let's state the obvious: 2004 is a post-Shrek world, leaving no excuse for the characters all looking like the power went out when the film was 60% digitally rendered. It might be forgivable if so much time wasn't dedicated to nausea-inducing action sequences included only for the sake of visual show-boating. Granted, TH's omnipresence is a positive, and the effort to animate his many characters with various notable Hanks physiques is impressive, if disorienting. *The Polar Express* movie was released at the dawn of the 3D and motion-capture boom, and the cinematic feat is clear, but no audience member loves 3D quite as much as the studios, and the character motions are stiff and unsettling.

As for the plot: If the narrator is indeed picked up by the Pol-Ex after 10PM, and he rides a *good* distance before their North Pole arrival, and then there's this gift ceremony, it must mean Santa's not even *starting* his excursion until the wee hours of Christmas morning. Time-zones considered, he should be lifting off while the narrator's eating lunch the day before. As I'm picking these nits, I begin questioning the message of the film itself; if one shouldn't need to see to believe, why'd they waste a seat on this kid who's belief is waning? For that matter, what's the vetting process for passengers on the Polar Express? I grumble my way to the end, believing myself to be the Christmas cynic, and then the credits roll and an animated Aerosmith plays us out, and I realize something: I'm not cynical, this movie is. To produce commercial content in the name of Christmas purity is emotionally manipulative, and stretching a children's picture book into a feature film with poppy musical numbers and flashy technology is a prime example.

Unless you're a kid, and you can just enjoy things. It's not so easy anymore, is it?

At some point, Christmas becomes less about capturing childlike whimsy and more about assuming you can't. Instead, you learn to enjoy the memory of how it used to make you feel. Then it becomes about seeing the memories re-emerge from the box, and the feeling you get from the memory of those old feelings. But it doesn't have to be sad, and therein lies my biggest issue with *The Polar Express*; this boy of fading belief experiences proof that Santa and the magic train are real, and he lives to pity everyone around him who never got to have this experience and are therefore cynical and lacking in spirit. For the rest of his life, he cherishes an authentic North Pole sleigh bell that rings only for believers, and thus serves as his personal belief authenticator. Putting aside the

fact that the bell being capable of discriminating against non-believers is proof enough of magic, the problem is this bell contradicts the moral of the story: you shouldn't need proof to believe. Before departure from the North Pole, the conductor says to the boy, "One thing about trains, it doesn't matter where they're going, what matters is deciding to get on." Not only is this lesson of blind faith not exemplary of the film, it's bad travel advice. But if Christmas were that simple, we wouldn't need the movies at all, and yet we do, as sure I need my nutcrackers, my VHS tapes, and my cardboard boxes.

It's really not about proof, it's about the reminder; the reminder to take stock of your year, to exchange your woes and grudges for a clean slate. If things have been especially tough and you're feeling gloomier than ever, Christmas is a reminder of your born ability to start over and retain only the good. As a child, you did it without thinking. That's why your Christmas boxes have only joy inside. That's why your memories of simpler Christmases, lighter Christmases, more magical Christmases, year after year, help you believe you can still have more just like them. It's in you to believe. You don't need to see it. You don't need a bell.

Thx!